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ANIMAL DAMAGE CONTROL IN SOUTH DAKOTA^{1/}

by

V. Van Ballenberghe^{2/}

South Dakota, like virtually all other states, is subject to economic losses from wildlife depredations. We have been in the government sponsored, animal damage control business perhaps longer than some states - our history dates back to the time of Three-toes and the Custer Wolf. In 1973 we are still in that business, perhaps more intensively than ever before, and we regard animal damage control as one of the most pervasive and difficult to solve wildlife problems facing us.

The Missouri River bisects South Dakota into approximately equal "East River" and "West River" land areas. These differ ecologically, and to a lesser extent politically, in several respects. From an agricultural standpoint, we are somewhat unique in that we have both small-farm and ranching enterprises differing in size, intensity of land use, and primary crops or livestock types produced. West River areas include a diversity of geomorphic land forms including prairie, sagebrush grasslands, river breaks, badlands, and mountains. All support ranching operations and each presents unique animal damage control problems. East River farms are smaller and livestock generally is more confined. Many East River counties contain 75 or more percent cropland, but those bordering the Missouri River or in the north-eastern corner of the state are characterized by large areas mainly suitable for grazing.

East and West River areas raise approximately equal numbers of sheep. Coyotes occur across the state but are much more numerous in West River. Red foxes also occur statewide and in recent years they have apparently increased markedly in northwestern South Dakota. Both the coyote and the fox prey upon sheep. This type of wildlife inflicted damage receives by far more publicity in the state than other depredations but in dollar-loss terms it is not the most important. Removal of grassland vegetation by rodents such as prairie dogs, ground squirrels and pocket gophers far outranks predation on sheep economically and has a much greater impact on the South Dakota agricultural economy. A great deal of the energy devoted to animal damage control in South Dakota is, however, directed at protecting the sheepgrower from coyote and fox depredations.

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Animal damage control programs west of the Missouri River in South Dakota are administered by the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Their program currently involves 13 District Field Assistants (DFA's) with the assignment of responding to livestock loss complaints through a service-oriented approach. The program's cost has been about \$200,000 per year (including administrative costs) of which about one-quarter is derived from hunting and fishing license revenue. Surtax levies on cattle and sheep are collected from both East and West River farm operators to help fund the West River control program. West River sheep producers contributed about \$13,500 to the program via surtax levies of four cents per head in Fiscal Year 1973.

A similar but much less intensive federal damage control program was operative in eastern South Dakota until July 1, 1971 when an extension trapper program was initiated by the Department of Game, Fish and Parks. Initially, five men including a roving trouble-shooter were hired to replace the Bureau's East River DFA's. These personnel are not USDA Cooperative Extension Service employees, but do emphasize the extension approach, i.e. an educational, self-help oriented program, to animal damage control. Since the program's inception, the number of extension trappers has been reduced to four. Estimated cost of the program is \$35,000 per year.

The extension trappers work closely with the Extension Wildlife Specialist who organizes monthly meetings, coordinates trap sales to landowners, assembles handout materials, and publicizes the program through radio, TV, and newspaper media. Damage complaints are forwarded to the trappers, through county agents, conservation officers or the Extension Wildlife Specialist. The goal of the program is to provide educational assistance to any landowner suffering depredation losses.

South Dakota's extension trappers work with a variety of species causing many types of damage. These include raccoon depredations on sweet corn, mink, fox, coyote, and skunk depredations on poultry and beaver damage to stream-side trees. Bird and rodent problems are not dealt with directly but rather are referred to the county agricultural agent who is better equipped with the appropriate educational tools.

The Extension Wildlife Specialist in cooperation with various other extension specialists has made an effort to acquaint the extension trappers with livestock management methods a farm operator can employ to lessen his vulnerability to depredation loss. Often, these methods combined with occasional removal of problem predators by the landowner reduce an individual's losses dramatically.

South Dakota's extension trappers have another main responsibility in addition to animal damage control. We believe that our fur resource is a valuable one from recreational and economic standpoints. Through talks and demonstrations to youth groups, sportsmen's clubs, farmers' organizations and others, the extension trappers try to encourage sport trapping as a form of recreation and a source of profit. Farm youth who often have little direct income benefit greatly from the program. By involving youth, by stressing humane trapping methods and by teaching the proper methods of handling pelts, we feel that the art of trapping will have a future in our state. Additionally, we feel that with increased numbers of skillful sport trappers in the state, the task of removing depredating individual carnivores is easier.

As with many other areas of wildlife management, public attitudes toward animal damage control and their political consequences must be identified and worked with to produce a viable program. Often, the only contact a landowner has with his state's wildlife agency results from wildlife depredations and his efforts to curtail them. We in South Dakota wildlife work feel that the public's image of us might well hinge on the success of our animal damage control program. If the projected image is unfavorable, the sportsman as well as the wildlife agency may suffer as evidenced by a sheepgrower's campaign in 1973 to prohibit hunter access on six million privately-owned acres in western South Dakota. The sheepgrowers were motivated by what they perceived to be unsatisfactory help with their coyote depredation problems.

Thus, we haven't solved all our animal damage control problems in South Dakota. There are some that we have not identified yet, much less begun to solve. With changing public attitudes in both directions, it seems certain that animal damage control in South Dakota will remain one of the most important challenges to our wildlife agencies and their employees. Some of the simplistic solutions of the past are inappropriate for the future. The direction we choose to go may influence far more than the damage control programs we adopt.